

# **The Mentions of Jesus in Qur'an**

Octavio da Cunha Botelho

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Those who have never read the Qur'an and know Islam only through the news, when informed that Jesus is sometimes mentioned in this holy book of Muslims will immediately think that all mentions are hostilities. Or someone more informed might suppose that these mentions would resemble the hostile accounts in the collection of anti-gospels known to Jews as *Sefer Toledoth Yeshu* (Book of Jesus' Life History), where Jesus is humiliated and debauched to extreme. However, on the contrary, in Qur'an, Jesus is praised and acknowledged as a Messenger of God (Allah) and called the Messiah, as well as his mother is praised as a virtuous woman. His miracles are admitted and he is appointed as a man of wisdom. However, with one crucial difference with Christianity: Jesus is not recognized as the Son of God, only as one of the Messengers of Allah (God), who came before Muhammad. In short, in reading the passages concerning Jesus, it is immediately possible to perceive the clear attempt to ensure that Jesus was an important Messenger of Allah (God), but the Christians changed their original message and then a new revelation through the Archangel Gabriel to Muhammad was necessary, in order to recover it. This recovery includes the original message of the Hebrew Bible, which the Jews also deformed. Jews and Christians are denominated in Qur'an as Peoples of the Book.

As with the translations of almost all ancient sacred books, the versions of the Qur'an to contemporary languages diverge considerably from one translation to another. So when the original

language of the religious text, in this case Arabic, is not known, the solution to resolve differences in translation becomes even more difficult. For this study, about ten English versions of different translators were compared, some so divergent from most that were not even listed in the bibliography.

Jesus is mentioned in the Qur'an by the name of *Īsā*, sometimes through the phrase: "*Īsā ibn Maryam*" (Jesus, son of Mary), in the following passages: 3: 42-59; 4: 157-9; 4: 171; 5: 72-5; 5: 110-17 and 19: 30-6. About the life and sayings of Jesus, it is clear that it was drawn from sources other than the canonical Gospels, as well as divergent from apocryphal texts, despite some coincident points. Muhammad was not able to read the canonical gospels because he was illiterate, so the little he learned was only by listening.

Finally, the mention of Jesus in the Qur'an is another example of how the versions about Jesus and his teachings were divergent in the early years of Christianity. Muhammad (570-632 e.c.) lived in present-day Saudi Arabia, at that time an uncultivated and wild suburb of the Byzantine Empire, where almost the entire population was illiterate.

### **The Illiteracy of Muhammad**

Muhammad is literally called illiterate (*ummi*) in verse 157 of *surah* 07 (*Al-A'raf* - The Heights) of the Qur'an, through the following passage: "Those who follow the Messenger (Muhammad), the illiterate, they find mentioned in the Torah and in the Gospels ..." Maulana Muhammad Ali explained that the Arabic word

"*ummī*" means "one who neither writes nor reads a text. That is why the Arabs are known as *ummī*<sup>1</sup> people, and the prophet *ummī* is either the prophet of the *ummī* people (i.e. the Arabs) because he was like them, or he was so called thus because he could not read and write" (Muhammad Ali, 2010: 210; see also: Mohar Ali, 2003: 525 and Haleem, 2005: 105). Another reference to Muhammad's inability to read and write appears in *surah* 29 (*Al-Ankabut* - the Spider), verse 48: "You have never recited any scripture before we have revealed this to you (scripture, i.e., the Qur'an), you never wrote a (scripture) with your right hand ..." (Haleem, 2005: 255; see also, Mohar Ali, 2003: 1282 and Muhammad Ali, 2010: 497).

However, the intriguing in first Quranic revelation is that Muhammad is illiterate, but miraculously he was able to read the text presented to him by Archangel Gabriel during a vision, since, according to the records preserved in the *Hadiths* (sayings and deeds of Muhammad) and in biographies, Muhammad was illiterate. According to the account of his earliest biography, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, written by *Muhammad ibn Ishāq* (707-773 e.c.),<sup>2</sup> this first revelation occurred when he was

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<sup>1</sup> Probably by the most cultured people of the neighborhood at that time, that is, the Greeks, the Romans and the Persians.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Warraq disbelieves this biography based on the fact that it was written around 750 CE, so more than 100 years after Muhammad's death in 632 CE, as well as the original work is lost and is only available today through a later recension of *Ibn Hisham*, who died in 834 CE, that is, two hundred years after the Muhammad's death (Warraq, 1998: 37). Even so, it is the

sleeping in a cave on Mount *Hira*, when it appeared to him through a vision, the Archangel Gabriel with a brocade quilt, in which there was some writing and said: recite, in which Muhammad asked: what should I recite? He could not read what was written because he was illiterate. By his question "what I should recite," one can see that his illiteracy was so complete that he could not even identify that what was on the quilt was a text. The archangel insisted for three more times and Muhammad gave the same answers, asking what he should recite, until he finally read the text and then woke up from sleep to keep in mind everything that was written in the text on that quilt<sup>3</sup> (Guillaume, 2004: 106; see also Williams, 1961: 61 and Peters, 1993: 51). This event is for Muslim believers an example of the power of what god is capable, but for the skeptics, a legend invented by the human imagination in order to exalt Muhammad. The first revelation on that Night of Destiny is recorded in the first five verses (*ayas*) of the *surah* 96, called *Alaq* (Clot), in the Qur'an,<sup>4</sup> when Allah commanded that Muhammad read: "Read (*iqraa*) in

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most authoritative biography among Muslims (see: Guillaume, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Skeptical interpreters of this passage explain that what Mahomet experienced at that moment was an outbreak of hallucination, rather than a mystical view, as understood by the Islamic tradition.

<sup>4</sup> Chronologically, these are the first verses of the Qur'an, so they should have been in the beginning, but since this text does not strictly follow the order whose revelations were dictated, this passage appears among one of the last *suras* (chapters) of the Qur'an.

the name of your Lord, created the man from a blood clot. Read (*iqrā*). And your Lord is the most generous, who taught (the use of) pen ..." (Palmer, 1994, vol. 9: 336, Mohar Ali: 2003: 2004, Haleem, 2005: 428 and Muhammad Ali, 2010: 784). Other translators translated the word *iqrā* by 'recite' (Arberry, 1955: 344 and Peters, 1994: 51). This difference in translation can be explained by the fact that in antiquity reading aloud was common, since the majority of the population was illiterate, so anyone who could read, read when asked, in a way for others to hear. Therefore, reading could be synonymous with reciting.

Now, the mention of the man's creation from a blood clot (*alaq*) mentioned above can only be a poetic allusion of someone or a culture, as well as of a time, who did not know the origin and the process of development of humanity, therefore the need to create poetic allusions to the origin of creatures that is now scientifically explained, otherwise, the statement is comical. However, *surah 75 (Al-Qiyāmah - The Resurrection)*, verses 37-9, does not understand this statement so poetically by saying: "Was not he (the man) a drop of ejaculated sperm (*manīy*)? So he was a sticky clot (*alaqah*) and He (God) created and perfectly formed it. Then, He made it (of the clot) the pair, male and female" (Mohar Ali, 2003: 1918; Haleem, 2005: 400 and Muhammad Ali, 2010: 739). Therefore, unlike the Old Testament myth, which reveals the creation of man from the clay and that of woman from the rib (or side) of Adam, the Qur'an in this passage presents another mythical version, that is, creation of man and woman from a clot (*alaqah*).

## The Birth of Jesus (*Īsā*)

The Annunciation to Mary in the Qur'an coincides in some respects and diverges in others with the canonical and apocryphal gospels, whose accounts appear in two passages (3: 42-7 and 19: 16-22). In the first one (3: 42-7), it was an angel who made the Annunciation: "Mary, God (Allah) has chosen you and made you pure. He really chose you above all women" (Qur'an, 3:42 - Mohar Ali, 2003: 173; Haleem, 2005: 37 and Muhammad Ali, 2010: 79). In the other version (19: 16-22), it was the spirit of God who announced in the form of a perfect man: "She (Mary) withdrew from her family to a place in the East and separated from them by a curtain. We send our spirit in order to appear before her in the form of a perfect man" (Qur'an, 19: 16-7 - Mohar Ali, 2003: 954, Haleem, 2005: 192 and Muhammad Ali, 2010: 377). In sura 03 (*Al-Imrān*), through two verses (45-6) with different translations among translators for the English language, the announcement is thus made to Mary: "The angels said: 'Mary, God gives you the good news of a word from him - his name will be Messiah, Jesus, son of Maryam, esteemed in this world and the next, and will be one of those close to God. And he will speak to men still in the cradle and during maturity, and he will be virtuous'" (Mohar Ali, 2003: 173; Haleem, 2005: 37-8 and Muhammad Ali, 2010: 80). The phrase "he will speak to men still in the cradle and during maturity" is especially intriguing. In the first case, Jesus spoke as baby in the cradle, a miracle to some extent comic that does not appear in the

canonical gospels but only in an apocryphal text.<sup>5</sup> The second case, the word "maturity" (Arabic: *kahl*) is controversial among the translators, since it points to the fact that Jesus (*Īsā*) did not die on the cross at the beginning of his adulthood, but lived until the old age. So in order to dilute the accuracy of the meaning of maturity, some translators have translated the word "*kahl*" as "adulthood," which may mean from the beginning of adulthood to old age. While Maulana Muhammad Ali, differently, translated the word "*kahl*" as "old age" (Muhammad Ali, 2010: 80).

The miracle episode of Jesus' speech in the cradle is developed in 19: 29-33, when Mary showed the newborn child (*Īsā* - Jesus) to her people. Then everyone was surprised and someone exclaimed: "Mary, you have brought something unprecedented.<sup>6</sup> O sister of *Aaron*, your father was not an evil man; your mother was not unclean."<sup>7</sup> Mary then pointed to the child (Jesus) in her defense. In addition, they said, "How can we talk to a child in the cradle? However, *Īsā* (Jesus) said: "I am a servant of Allah, He has granted me the Scripture, He has made me a prophet and blessed.

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<sup>5</sup> *Arab Gospel of Childhood*, § 01 (Platt Jr, 1926: 38 and Botelho, 2015: 82).

<sup>6</sup>The translation of the Arabic word "*farīy*" (unprecedented, unpublished) is controversial, therefore translated with different meanings in the translations consulted. I used here the translation of M. Mohar Ali (2003: 957).

<sup>7</sup>The interpreters of this passage differ as to whether the surprise of the people was because of Mary's announcement that her son was the Messiah, thus an affront to the Jews of the day, or whether she had given birth to a child without have been touched.



He commanded me to pray and give alms until I live. In addition, be obedient to my mother. He did not make me a tyrant or an immoral. Peace was with me the day I was born, it will be with me the day I die and the day I am reborn to life again<sup>8</sup> "(Mohar Ali, 2003: 957; Haleem, 2005: 192 and Muhammad Ali, 2010: 379- 80). This miracle also appears, with a different wording in an apocryphal gospel known as *Arab Gospel of Childhood*, § 01 (Platt Jr. 1926: 38 and Botelho, 2015: 82).

The birth of Jesus (*Īsā*) narrated in Qur'an 19: 22-60 is different from the canonical version of Luke 2: 04-12. Instead of being born in a manger on the way to Bethlehem to attend the convocation of the census, in the Qur'anic version Mary had withdrawn to a distant place and gave birth to Jesus by the trunk of a palm tree after suffering severe pains: "After Mary had conceived, she withdrew to a distant place, and when the pains led her to hold to the branch of a palm-tree, she exclaimed: 'I would rather have died and forgotten all this long ago 'but a voice spoke to her from below:' Do not be annoying, your Lord has placed a stream under your feet, and if you shake the trunk of the palm tree toward you, mature dates will fall on you, then eat, drink, be happy and tell someone you find, 'I have promised the Lord of Mercy to keep me from the conversation and I will not talk today'" (Haleem, 2005: 192).

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<sup>8</sup>Muslim interpreters understand that this passage does not refer to the resurrection of Jesus after the crucifixion, for, as we will see later, the Qur'an holds that Jesus did not die on the cross.

## **Jesus (*Īsā*), Only a Messenger**

The Qur'an recognizes and praises Jesus (*Īsā*) as Messiah and Messenger of Allah, but does not recognize him as the Son of God or as God Himself: "Those who say, 'Allah is the Messiah, the son of Mary'. (That being so) the Messiah himself said, 'Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord.' (...) The Messiah, the son of Mary, was but a messenger, other messengers came before him; his mother was a virtuous woman, they both ate food (just like the other mortals). See how we clarify these signs to them (Christians), see how they (the Christians) are deceived" (Qur'an, 05: 72 and 75 - Haleem, 2005: 75).

In addition, furthermore an even more severe reproof to Christians: "O People of the Book,<sup>9</sup> do not exceed in your religion and do not say anything about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, (Jesus), the son of Mary, was nothing more than a Messenger of Allah (God), his word addressed to Mary, a spirit of him. So believe in Allah and His messengers and do not speak of a Trinity, stop it, it will be better for you. God is the only God. He is far above having a child, everything in the heaven, the earth belongs to Him, and He is the best to trust. The Messiah (Jesus) would never refuse of being (only) a servant of God ..." (Qur'an, 4,171-2 - Haleem, 2005: 166 and Mohar Ali, 2003: 320-1).

## **Jesus (*Īsā*) did not die crucified**

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<sup>9</sup> Reference to Christians.

According to the Qur'an 4: 157, Jesus did not die on the cross: "Some say: We killed the Messiah, Jesus (*Īsā*), the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah. (But in reality) they did not killed him, nor did they crucify him, although it seemed that this was done, those who disagree on this are full of doubts, without knowledge, only supposition; they certainly did not kill him" (Haleem, 2005: 65). Another claim is that he was not crucified (Ahmad, 2003: 57-62), but replaced by another person at the time of the crucifixion, who was crucified in his place, or that he survived the crucifixion, not dying but only fainted (Ahmad, 2003: 17), the latter case is known as the "fainting hypothesis". Then he set out on a trip to the East, where he passed away in these distant lands at his advanced age (Ahmad, 2003: *passim*), or even that Jesus visited the eastern regions both in his youth and after his survival at the crucifixion (Kersten, 2001). Mormons believe that Jesus made appearances in America after his death. Also, in the Islamic tradition, H. M. Ghulam Ahmad mentioned some *Hadiths* (sayings of Muhammad), the collection known by the name of *Kanz-ul-Ummal*, that Jesus lived to the advanced age of 125, traveled through many parts of the world and became known as the "traveling prophet" (Ahmad, 2003: 62-3). This author, who is the founder of the reformist Islamic movement *Ahrmadiyya Muslim Jamat*, is one of the first and most ardent supporters of the thesis that Jesus survived the crucifixion, traveled to India to find the tribes of Israel and, most surprisingly, of the argument that the prophet *Yuz Asaf*, buried in the shrine of *Roza Bal* in the city of *Srinagar*, Kashmir, India, is Jesus himself. He was the main

disseminator of this tradition of *Roza Bal*, through his book *Misih Hindustan Mein*, published in 1908 in Urdu, later published in English in 1944, and entitled "Jesus in India".

The subject of Jesus' trip to India gained international interest in 1887, when the Russian journalist Nicolas Notovitch, during a trip to the *Ladak* region of Kashmir, India, where the culture of Tibetan Buddhism predominates, *Ladak* is nicknamed "Little Tibet". After a fractured leg, he had to be assisted by monks from the Buddhist monastery of *Hemis*, in that region, which forced him to extend his stay. At the time, he was informed of the existence of an unknown manuscript with the name of "*The Life of Saint Issa, the Best of the Children of Man*" stored in the library of this monastery. *Issa* is the name given to Jesus in the Qur'an (3:45 and 5:75). Then, with the help of an interpreter, he wrote down the translations and then published them in Paris with the title "*La Vie Inconnue de Jesus Christ*" in 1894. The English edition appeared soon after, with the name of "*The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*", in 1895 (Notovitch, 1916: 08-9). The book certainly provoked an uproar in the intellectual environment. Opinions were divided among those who believed in the publication of Notovitch and those who perceived fraud in it. The first to contest was the then-prestigious orientalist F. Max Müller, in the English newspaper *The Nineteenth Century*, in October 1894, where he denounced Notovitch's discovery as a fraud, as well as suspected even of his Russian journalist's visit to the monastery of *Hemis* in *Ladak* (Kerster, 2001: 10). Another attack, this time from a professor at the Government College of Agra, India, J. Archibald

Douglas, whose visit to *Ladak* in 1895 led him to investigate the authenticity of Notovitch's discovery. His account was published in April of 1896 in the *Orientalischen Bibliografie* with the title of "*Documents prove the fraud of Notovitch*". Another publication of *The Nineteenth Century* in 1896 contains the statement of J. A. Douglas, during his visit to the *Hemis* monastery, that the abbot, in knowing the Notovitch publication, replied that "it was all a lie" (Kerster 2001: 11).

In 1956, Edgar J. Goodspeed used the first chapter of his book *Famous Biblical Hoaxes or Modern Apocrypha* to demonstrate the fraud of Nicolas Notovitch. More recently, the well-known and dedicated biblical researcher Bart D. Ehrman wrote: "Today there is not a single recognized researcher on the planet who has any doubt about the subject. The whole story was invented by Notovitch, who earned a lot of money and a substantial sum of notoriety for his rumor" (Ehrman, 2011: 282-3). To James R. Lewis, "everything is a forge" (Lewis, 2003: 79s).

On the other hand, Nicolas Notovitch had defenders, naturally esotericists, mystics, and a self-proclaimed seer (Kersten, 2001: 01-18, Abhedananda, 1987 and Prophet, 1987: 92-120 respectively). In short, only these modalities of people believed in Notovitch, that is, no one in the academic and scientific milieu. The fact is that the secret manuscript that was shown to him in the monastery, from which Notovich took his translated notes, was never shown publicly, not even a copy, and thus was never delivered to the scrutiny of academic scholars with knowledge in Paleography, in Textual Criticism and Philology, for the evaluation

of its authenticity, its meaning and its credibility as a historical document.

### **Jesus (*Īsā*) is like Adam**

In a brief passage, Jesus (*Īsā*) is compared to Adam in the Qur'an 3:59: "In the eyes of Allah, *Īsā* (Jesus) is like Adam. He created it from clay, and told it, "be it," and he came into existence" (Mohar Ali, 2003: 178-9 and Haleem, 2005: 38-9). Therefore, this passage compares Jesus with Adam, that is, Jesus was a man like Adam and not a divine creature. Thus, according to the interpretation of the Muslims, Jesus was nothing more than a mortal man, for one who was created from the clay cannot be a divine creature.

### **Dialogue between God (Allah) and Jesus (*Īsā*)**

In another passage from the Qur'an (5.109-17), Allah will gather the messengers on the Day of Judgment and then will say to Jesus (*Īsā*): "Jesus, son of Mary, remember my grace upon you and your mother, when I protected you with the Holy Spirit, so that you spoke to the people in birth and maturity. In addition, when I taught you the Book, wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel (*Injil*), and when you created from the clay a figure of bird, with your breath it became a real bird with my permission.<sup>10</sup> In addition, when thou hast cured the blind man by birth and the leper with my permission, and raised

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<sup>10</sup> This was a miracle effected in the infancy of Jesus that is not narrated in the canonical gospels, but is reported in the *Arab Gospel of Childhood*, § 36 (Platt Jr., 1926: 52-3 and Botelho, 2015: 83).

the dead. And when I protected you from the Children of Israel, when you brought them near with the evidences and there they said they did not believe in them: 'This is nothing more than witchcraft.'

And when I inspired the disciples, 'Believe in me and my Messenger,' and they said, 'We believe, testify that we are submissive' (111).

And when the disciples asked, "O Jesus, son of Mary,<sup>11</sup> can your Lord send us from heaven a table that is served?" And he answered them, 'Fear God and you are believers' (112). They said: 'We want to eat from it so that our hearts may be sustained and that we may know that you have told us the truth and are witnesses to it' (113). And Jesus, the son of Mary, said: 'God, our Lord, send us from heaven a table which is a feast for us all from the first to the last, and let it be a sign of you. And gratify us: you are the best of the donors' (114). And God said, I will bring down. Whoever among you disbelieves afterwards will be subject to a punishment, to which I will not subject anyone to the worlds' (115). And when God asked, 'O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to men, 'Worship me and my mother, as two gods instead of one God'? Jesus replied, 'Glorified be it! How would I say what does not belong to me? If I had said so, you would know. You know what is in my soul, and I do not know what

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<sup>11</sup> The Koran exaggerates in the repetition of the phrase: "Jesus son of Mary", while the father of Jesus is not mentioned anywhere.

is in your soul. You are the knower of the invisible<sup>12</sup> (116).

I said nothing to you<sup>13</sup> except what you commanded me: 'Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.' And I was a witness of what they did while I lived among them. When you called me to You, it was You who watched them. For you are a witness of everything'<sup>14</sup> (117 - Mohar Ali, 2003: 384-9, Haleem, 2005: 78-9 and Muhammad Ali, 2010: 161-3).

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<sup>12</sup> The intention here is to show that Christians deformed the original teachings of Jesus by preaching the divinity of the mother of Jesus.

<sup>13</sup> To the apostles and followers of Jesus.

<sup>14</sup> If this passage is referring to the death of Jesus on the cross, then it will be in contradiction with passage 4.157, which assures that Jesus did not die on the cross.



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